



March 2020

K-12 EDUCATION

Information on How States Assess Alternative School Performance

March 2020

Highlights of [GAO-20-310](#), a report to the Chairman, Committee on Education and Labor, House of Representatives.

Why This Matters

States use their accountability systems to identify low-performing schools, which can receive added support and are expected to improve.

Alternative schools serve students whose needs are not met in a regular school. They often serve at-risk students who are struggling academically or behaviorally.

Given this unique population, we looked at how states hold alternative schools accountable.

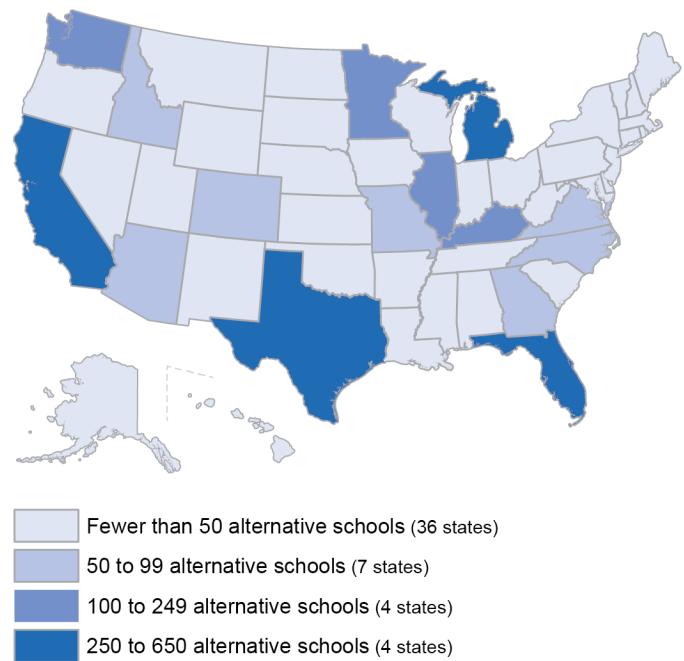
Key Takeaways

Our review of 15 selected state accountability systems—used to assess all types of schools—found that all 15 include at least one indicator that research organizations and relevant studies considered useful in capturing alternative school achievement. For example:

- **Eleven of the fifteen states use college and career readiness indicators.** These indicators may capture achievements (e.g., industry-recognized certifications, internships) that prepare high school students for a career rather than higher education. Alternative schools commonly have a career focus.
- **Ten of the fifteen states use extended-year graduation rates.** Students at alternative schools may be behind on credits or face trauma and other challenges that can hinder learning. We found that alternative high schools have substantially lower 4-year graduation rates. So, some states' practice of measuring graduation rates past the standard 4 years may capture additional alternative school performance.

We also found a few states that, as part of their accountability system, adopted approaches to differentiate alternative schools when identifying them for support and improvement. For example, when identifying the lowest performing 5 percent of schools, Idaho groups alternative schools separately from nonalternative ones.

Distribution of Alternative K-12 Public Schools



How GAO Did This Study

We analyzed the Department of Education's most recent alternative school data; reviewed federal laws and accountability systems from 15 states with the most alternative schools; and interviewed federal and selected state, school district, and school officials in three states.

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Contents

Letter		1
Background		4
Alternative Schools Aim to Re-engage Students, but Academic Proficiency and Graduation Rates Are Low		11
Selected State Plans Describe Accountability Systems That Assess Alternative Schools		19
Agency Comments		24
Appendix I	Analysis of National Data on Alternative Schools	26
Appendix II	GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments	29
<hr/>		
Tables		
Table 1: Indicators Included in Selected ESSA State Plans for High School Performance Assessment		20
Table 2: Percent of Alternative and Nonalternative Schools Identified for Comprehensive Support and Improvement, School Year 2018-19		23
Figures		
Figure 1: Distribution of K-12 Alternative Schools, School Year 2015-16		5
Figure 2: Student Enrollment in Alternative and Nonalternative Schools, by Demographic Group, School Year 2015-16		6
Figure 3: Demographics of Students Transferred to Alternative Schools for Disciplinary Reasons, School Year 2015-16		7
Figure 4: Four Key Components of Accountability Systems under ESSA		8
Figure 5: Average School Enrollment by Type of School, School Year 2015-16		12
Figure 6: 4-Year Graduation Rates of Alternative and Nonalternative High Schools, School Year 2015-16		16
Figure 7: 4-Year Graduation Rates of Alternative High Schools by Demographic Groups, School Year 2015-16		17
Figure 8: Alternative and Nonalternative High Schools' Proficiency Rates, School Year 2015-16		18

Figure 9: Alternative High Schools' Proficiency Rates for Language Arts by Demographic Groups, School Year 2015-16

19

Abbreviations

CRDC	Civil Rights Data Collection
Education	U.S. Department of Education
ESEA	Elementary and Secondary Education Act
ESSA	Every Student Succeeds Act

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U.S. GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE

441 G St. N.W.
Washington, DC 20548

March 27, 2020

The Honorable Robert C. “Bobby” Scott
Chairman
Committee on Education and Labor
House of Representatives

Dear Mr. Chairman:

Alternative schools are designed to support the educational needs of some of the most vulnerable K-12 public school students in the nation.¹ These students may face trauma, such as poverty or homelessness, and are frequently at risk of educational failure because of truancy, disruptive behavior, or suspension, among other things. Recent media reports raised questions about the quality of alternative school education and oversight compared to nonalternative schools. Under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA), as reauthorized and amended by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015, all states must have accountability systems that meet certain requirements and have flexibility in how they design their systems. In general, ESSA requires states to measure the performance of their schools and identify underperforming schools and the student subgroups needing additional assistance.² States must describe their accountability systems in state plans, which the Department of Education (Education) must approve.³

You asked us to examine various aspects of alternative schools. In 2019, we reported on student enrollment and discipline in such schools.⁴ This report examines (1) what is known about alternative schools’ academic environments and their students’ performance and (2) how selected

¹There are various types of alternative schools—regular public schools, charter schools, and juvenile justice facilities (i.e., facilities with incarcerated students). Alternative schools may also have different focuses, such as academic, disciplinary, or both.

²See generally 20 U.S.C. § 6311(c)(4). Student subgroups include English learners, children with disabilities, students from major racial and ethnic groups, and economically disadvantaged students. 20 U.S.C. § 6311(c)(2).

³20 U.S.C. § 6311(a)(1),(c)(1).

⁴GAO, *K-12 Education: Certain Groups of Students Attend Alternative Schools in Greater Proportions Than They Do Other Schools*. [GAO-19-373](#) (Washington, D.C.: June, 2019).

states hold alternative schools accountable for student academic performance.

To determine what is known about alternative school academic environments and student performance, we analyzed data from Education's Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) for the 2015-16 school year, the most recent data available.⁵ We also analyzed data from the National Center for Education Statistics' *EDFacts* on student graduation and academic proficiency rates.⁶ For these analyses, we included schools that met the CRDC definition of an alternative school: "a public elementary or secondary school that addresses the needs of students that typically cannot be met in a regular school program. The school provides nontraditional education; serves as an adjunct to a regular school; and falls outside of the categories of regular education, special education, or vocational education." Further, because juvenile justice facilities also address the educational needs of students that cannot be met in a regular school setting, we included all juvenile justice facilities reported in the CRDC, whether or not they were identified as alternative schools.⁷ We determined these data were sufficiently reliable for the purposes of this report by reviewing documentation, conducting electronic testing, and interviewing Education officials and selected state officials. See appendix I for more information on our analysis of Education's data and counts of alternative schools.

To describe how selected states hold alternative schools accountable for student academic performance, we reviewed applicable requirements in ESEA, as reauthorized and amended by ESSA.⁸ We selected the 15

⁵CRDC is a biennial national survey that Education requires nearly all public school districts and schools to complete. U.S. territorial schools (except for Puerto Rico, commencing for the 2017-18 CRDC collection), Department of Defense schools, and tribal schools are not part of the CRDC.

⁶*EDFacts* is a centralized data collection through which state education agencies submit pre-K through grade 12 data to Education.

⁷According to Education officials, schools are identified in the CRDC as a juvenile justice facility based on the Common Core of Data directory information. For the purposes of the survey, the CRDC does not permit a school district to self-designate a school as a juvenile justice facility. They are already designated as such. However, according to Education officials, school districts may notify the Office for Civil Rights of a discrepancy in the school designation so that Education can correct the information.

⁸Pub. L. No. 89-10, 79 Stat. 27, as reauthorized and amended by Pub. L. No. 114-95, 129 Stat. 1802 (2015).

states with the largest number of alternative schools for our review.⁹ These states accounted for about 80 percent of alternative schools nationally. We reviewed these states' plans for the performance indicators and processes used to differentiate performance of public high schools as well as identify low-performing ones.¹⁰ Through this plan review and review of selected states' accountability documents, we identified several states that also had separate state accountability systems for their alternative schools. We reviewed related state documents and solicited input from relevant state officials to better understand how these accountability systems differed from the accountability systems created by the states under ESSA. To better understand issues related to alternative school accountability, we interviewed Education officials as well as representatives of four research organizations that have studied alternative schools and educational performance measures.¹¹ We also reviewed related studies.

To identify examples of alternative schools' academic environments and better understand how some states approach accountability, we visited three states: California, Colorado, and Kentucky. We selected these states because they have a high number of alternative schools and varied in their approaches to alternative school accountability and in geographic diversity. In each state, we conducted semi-structured interviews with state officials responsible for alternative school accountability and visited two or three school districts and interviewed officials from up to three alternative schools within each district (a total of seven districts and 13 schools). We selected districts and schools for a mix of alternative school type (regular alternative, charter alternative, juvenile justice facility) and focus (academic, disciplinary, both). Although the results of these site visits are not generalizable, they provide information about varied school academic environments and additional details on alternative school approaches to accountability within the selected state.

⁹The 15 states are: Arizona, California, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Illinois, Kentucky, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, North Carolina, Texas, Virginia, and Washington. State plans were accessed and downloaded on August 12, 2019. <https://www2.ed.gov/admins/lead/account/stateplan17/index.html>.

¹⁰We focused our analysis on accountability requirements for high schools because most alternative schools serve students in grades 6 through 12 and nearly half serve students in grades 9 through 12.

¹¹We interviewed representatives from the American Youth Policy Forum, Civic, Johns Hopkins University, and Momentum Strategy and Research.

We conducted this performance audit from January 2019 to March 2020 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Background

Overview of Alternative Schools and Their Students

While most states have formal definitions of alternative education, states may structure and operate their alternative schools differently.¹² Since states and districts determine what it means to be an alternative school, their target populations, settings, services, and structure may vary. For example, some states provide very specific criteria for enrollment in alternative schools (e.g. students must meet at-risk descriptors). Schools may also target specific populations, such as pregnant or parenting teens, suspended or expelled students, or recovered dropouts, which may influence the curriculum or educational approach.

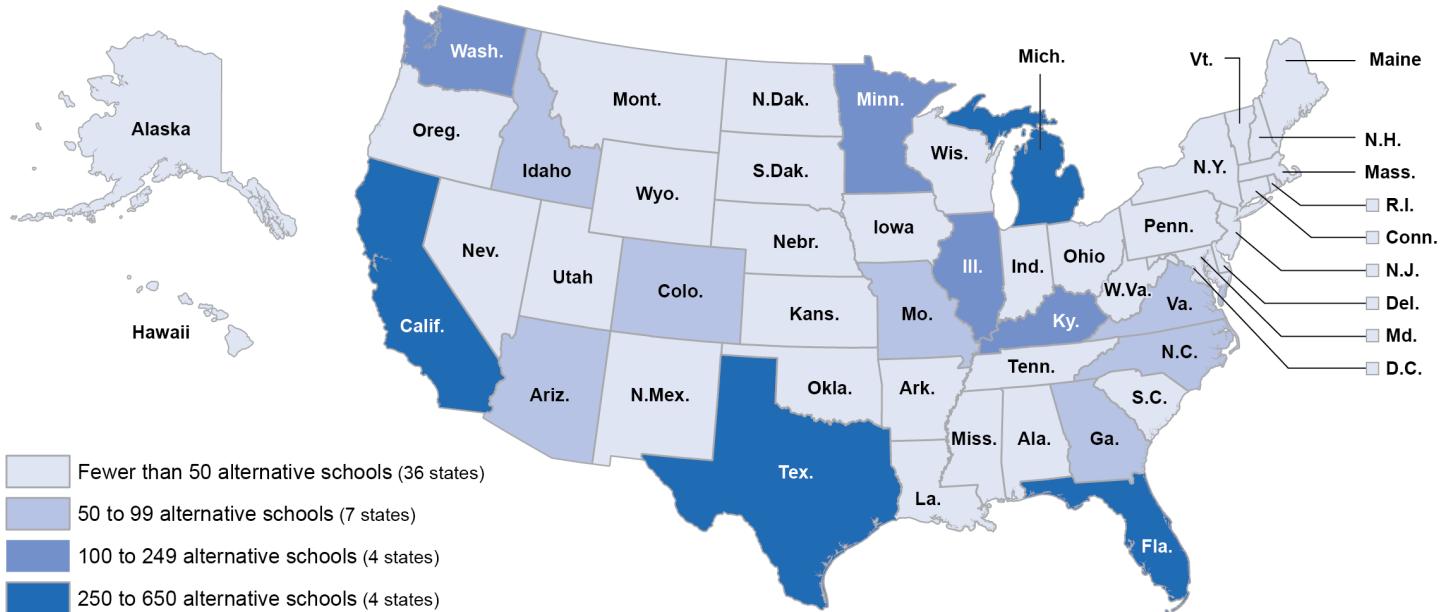
In school year 2015-16, about 4 percent (3,557) of all K-12 public schools were alternative schools, according to our analysis of Education's CRDC data. Most alternative schools were regular district-managed public schools (77 percent), but others had different governance models, including juvenile justice facilities (17 percent) and charter schools (6 percent). Alternative schools also had varying areas of focus. About 32 percent of alternative schools had an academic focus and another 25 percent had a disciplinary focus. The remaining 43 percent had a combined focus on both academics and discipline. Further, about 85 percent of alternative schools serve students in grades 6 through 12 and nearly half (46 percent) exclusively serve high school students.

According to data from Education's 2015-16 CRDC, alternative schools are present in nearly every state in the United States (see fig.1). In 2019,

¹²Porowski, A., O'Conner, R., & Luo, J. L. *How do states define alternative education?* (REL 2014-038). Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Mid-Atlantic. (Washington, DC: 2014). While states may establish alternative programs, this review focused on alternative schools.

we found that selected school districts differed in how they reported the number of alternative schools.¹³

Figure 1: Distribution of K-12 Alternative Schools, School Year 2015-16



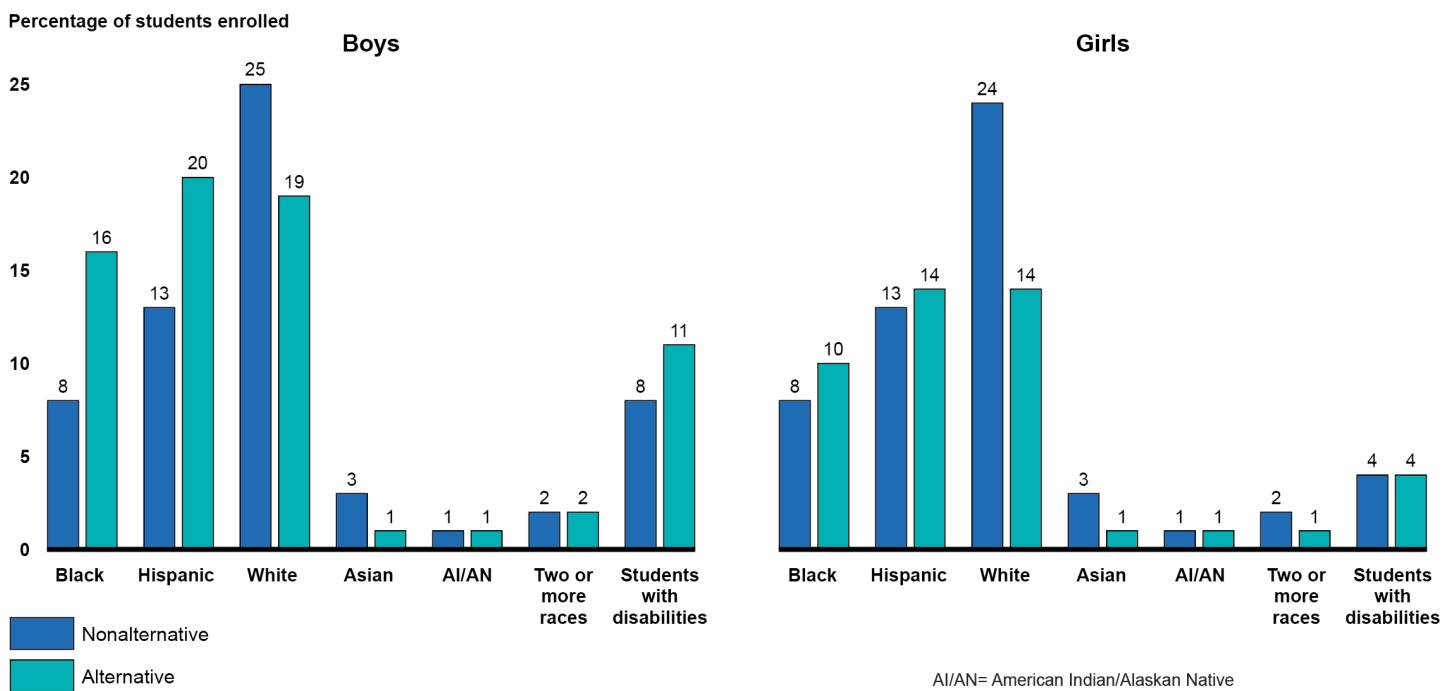
Source: GAO analysis of data from the Department of Education's Civil Rights Data Collection; National Atlas of the United States (base map). | GAO-20-310

In the 2015-16 school year, approximately 369,000 students attended alternative schools, which is fewer than 1 percent of all public school students, according to data from Education's CRDC.¹⁴ Yet, these students are among the most vulnerable because they are often at risk of dropping out, are incarcerated, or were expelled or suspended from nonalternative schools. As we reported in 2019, Black and Hispanic boys and girls, and boys with disabilities, were overrepresented at alternative schools, while White and Asian boys and girls were underrepresented (see fig. 2).

13 GAO-19-373.

¹⁴According to Education's CRDC, the count for student enrollment is based on October 1 or its closest school day. Alternative school student populations may be highly transitory, with students spending anywhere from a day to more than a year enrolled.

Figure 2: Student Enrollment in Alternative and Nonalternative Schools, by Demographic Group, School Year 2015-16



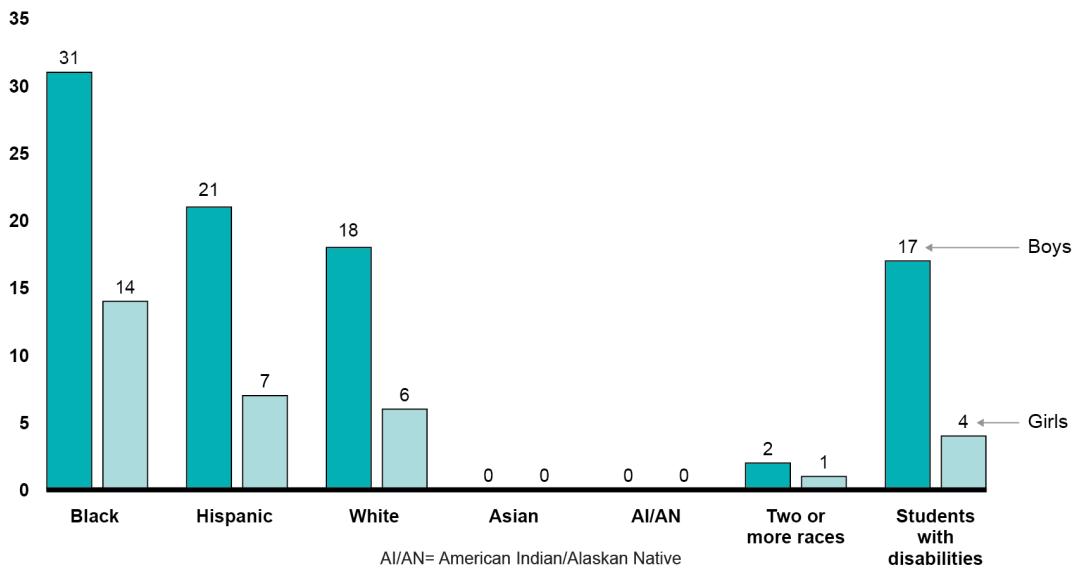
Source: GAO analysis of data from the Department of Education's Civil Rights Data Collection. | GAO-20-310

Note: Percent enrollment for each race/ethnicity and disability category is calculated as a percentage of all students enrolled at that school type. The percent enrollment of boys and girls with disabilities is calculated separately from other demographic groups. Students with disabilities refers to students who receive special education and related services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

We also reported that when we analyzed these data by the focus of alternative schools—disciplinary, academic or mixture of both—Black and Hispanic boys as well as boys with disabilities were the most overrepresented in disciplinary schools. Relatedly, nearly 75 percent of students transferred to alternative schools for disciplinary reasons in school year 2015-16 were Black or Hispanic (see fig. 3).

Figure 3: Demographics of Students Transferred to Alternative Schools for Disciplinary Reasons, School Year 2015-16

Percentage of students transferred



Source: GAO analysis of data from the Department of Education's Civil Rights Data Collection. | GAO-20-310

Note: The percentage of students transferred for boys and girls with disabilities is calculated separately from other demographic groups. Students with disabilities refers to students who receive special education and related services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. Students may be transferred to alternative schools for a disciplinary infraction, a pattern of problematic behavior, or continual academic issues, according to the Department of Education.

Factors Affecting Student Behavior and Educational Success

Students enrolled in alternative schools often face personal challenges outside the classroom that may impact their academic performance and behavior. In 2019, we reported on alternative school students experiencing multiple types of trauma, such as gang violence, the death of schoolmates or parents, poverty, or homelessness.¹⁵ According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, research shows that childhood trauma may lead to lower grades, suspension and expulsion, increased use of mental health services, and increased involvement with the child welfare and juvenile justice systems.¹⁶

¹⁵GAO-19-373.

¹⁶Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration and The National Child Traumatic Stress Network, *Understanding Child Trauma*, SMA-15-4923 (2016).

ESSA Accountability Requirements

ESSA requires that in order for states to receive a Title I grant, they must file a plan with Education.¹⁷ As part of this plan, states must include a description of their state-wide accountability system.¹⁸ In designing these systems, states must: 1) determine long-term goals, 2) develop performance indicators, 3) differentiate schools and 4) identify and assist low performers (see fig. 4).

Figure 4: Four Key Components of Accountability Systems under ESSA



Source: GAO analysis of accountability system requirements under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). | GAO-20-310

Note: This figure is intended to provide a high-level summary of selected components of state accountability systems as required by ESSA. For additional information on these components, see 20 U.S.C. § 6311(c) and (d).

ESSA requires states to annually differentiate schools based on specific academic indicators for all students and for certain student subgroups.¹⁹ For public high schools, these indicators include academic achievement, as measured by proficiency on the annual state assessments,²⁰ the 4-

¹⁷20 U.S.C. § 6311(a)(1). Title I, Part A of ESEA, as amended by ESSA, provides financial assistance to school districts and schools with high numbers or percentages of children from low-income families. For purposes of this report, we are referring to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, as reauthorized and amended by the Every Student Succeeds Act, as ESSA.

¹⁸20 U.S.C. § 6311(c)(1). According to Education, ESSA requires a single statewide accountability system and, therefore, prohibits a separate system for alternative schools.

¹⁹20 U.S.C. § 6311(h)(1)(C)(v).

²⁰At least once in high school, states must measure students' academic achievement via proficiency on the state's annual assessments in mathematics and reading or language arts. 20 U.S.C. § 6311(b)(2)(B)(v)(I).

year adjusted cohort graduation rate,²¹ and progress in achieving English language proficiency for English learners.²² In addition, states must have at least one statewide indicator of school quality or student success that meets certain criteria as outlined in the law.²³ This indicator may measure such things as student engagement, student access, advanced coursework completion, and postsecondary readiness.

States must use these indicators annually to meaningfully differentiate the performance of their public schools, including alternative schools. Based on this information, states must also identify schools for various types of support and improvement (see text box).²⁴

²¹20 U.S.C. § 6311(c)(4)(B)(iii). ESSA requires states to use a 4-year adjusted cohort graduation rate, which measures the percentage of students in a cohort who graduated 4 years after starting the ninth grade. The cohort is adjusted to add or remove students who transfer, leave the country, or are deceased. States can also use graduation rates that extend beyond the 4-year cohort.

²²20 U.S.C. § 6311(c)(4)(B)(iv).

²³20 U.S.C. § 6311(c)(4)(B)(v).

²⁴20 U.S.C. § 6311(c)(4)(C),(D). ESSA required states to identify schools for support and improvement by the 2017-18 school year. However, the Secretary of Education gave states an additional year to begin identifying schools pursuant to the authority in section 4(b) of ESSA. As a result, states were not required to identify schools until the 2018-19 school year.

Types of School Support and Improvement under ESSA

Comprehensive support and improvement

Schools within a state are identified for comprehensive support and improvement if they are:

- in the lowest-performing 5 percent of schools receiving Title I funds; or
- high schools failing to graduate one-third or more of their students.

Targeted support and improvement

- Schools are identified for targeted support and improvement if they have any student subgroup consistently underperforming, as determined by the State.
- Schools are identified for additional targeted support if they have any student subgroup that on its own meets the criteria for comprehensive support and improvement by performing at the lowest-performing 5 percent of Title I schools in the state. Schools identified for additional targeted support that have not improved within a state-determined number of years are reclassified as needing comprehensive support and improvement.

Source: GAO analysis of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). 20 U.S.C. § 6311(c)(4)(D)(i); 20 U.S.C. § 6311(d)(2)(A)(i); 20 U.S.C. § 6311(d)(2)(C). | GAO-20-310

For each school identified as needing improvement, the district or school, in partnership with its stakeholders, must develop and implement an improvement plan aimed at improving student outcomes, among other things.²⁵ For example, plans developed for schools identified for comprehensive support and improvement must be based on a school-level needs assessment, consider the school's performance against the state's long-term goals, and include evidence-based interventions.

ESSA requires Education to review and approve state plans, including descriptions of the processes used to assess performance and identify low-performing schools, including alternative schools.²⁶ Education established a peer-review process that employed multi-disciplinary teams, which provided feedback on the state plans with the intent of strengthening their technical and overall quality, as required by ESSA.²⁷ Peer review teams reviewed state plans, which Education received in the spring and fall of 2017, and suggested improvements where appropriate. These peer reviews informed Education's review of state plans, which

²⁵20 U.S.C. § 6311(d)(1)(B).

²⁶20 U.S.C. § 6311(a)(4)(A)(iv). Education must approve a state plan no later than 120 days after its submission.

²⁷20 U.S.C. § 6311(a)(4).

were subsequently approved.²⁸ In addition, Education officials said they conducted Title I monitoring of nine states in 2018, using a new protocol for the accountability and school improvement sections of ESSA. However, Education only used the new protocol on a subset of the nine states because several states were still in the process of having their state plan approved. Education officials said they revised the protocol based on its initial use and monitored two additional states in the fall of 2019. Following this review, they again revised the protocol and plan to conduct additional monitoring in 2020.

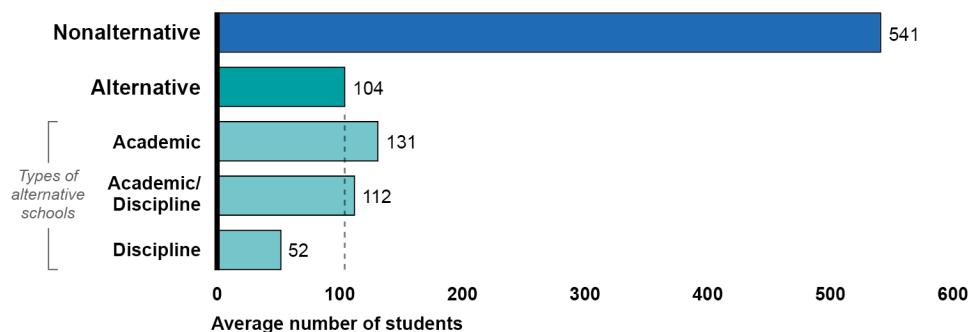
Alternative Schools Aim to Re-engage Students, but Academic Proficiency and Graduation Rates Are Low

Alternative Schools Are Smaller and Offer Fewer Classes Than Nonalternative Schools, and Use Various Educational Approaches to Re-engage Students

Alternative schools were, on average, smaller than nonalternative schools, according to Education's most recent CRDC data. Among different types of alternative schools, those focused on discipline were the smallest on average and those focused on academics were the largest, according to the most recent CRDC (see fig. 5).

²⁸Education officials said some states proposed holding alternative schools accountable using a different methodology than for nonalternative schools. They explained that they told these states that ESSA did not permit differing methodologies within their statewide accountability systems and that these states were likely utilizing flexibility detailed in Education regulations issued in November 2016 (81 Fed. Reg. 86,076 (Nov. 29, 2016)) and overturned by Congress pursuant to the Congressional Review Act in March 2017 (Pub. L. No. 115-13, 131 Stat. 77 (2017)). Under the Congressional Review Act, if Congress enacts a joint resolution of disapproval within a certain time period after a rule is submitted to Congress, the rule shall not take effect (or shall not continue to take effect) and it may not be reissued in substantially the same form unless expressly authorized by subsequent law. 5 U.S.C. §§ 801-802.

Figure 5: Average School Enrollment by Type of School, School Year 2015-16



Source: GAO analysis of data from the Department of Education's Civil Rights Data Collection. | GAO-20-310

Relatedly, most district and school officials we spoke to said their alternative schools have relatively small class sizes, with most reporting class sizes of 10 to 20 students. Small school and class size can enable relationship-building with staff, which, according to several school officials we spoke to, is needed to engage these students.

Class options at alternative schools are frequently limited. According to our analysis of CRDC data, nearly one-third of alternative schools offered one or no math classes, compared to about one-tenth of nonalternative schools.²⁹ Similarly, nearly two-thirds of alternative schools offered one or no science classes, compared to one-fifth of nonalternative schools. Most alternative schools provided at least one basic math and science class (e.g. algebra, geometry, or biology). When we analyzed these data by the focus of alternative schools—disciplinary, academic, or mixture of both—we found that disciplinary schools offered the fewest classes, with about a quarter offering no math classes and about a third offering no science classes. When asked about the reasons for limited classes at alternative schools, state education officials in two of the three states we visited said that such schools are often intended for short-term student enrollment. State education officials from one state added that alternative schools in rural areas may lack the resources for multiple classes, but may provide additional classes through virtual programs.³⁰ These findings are

²⁹Our CRDC analysis was limited to high schools and included the following classes: algebra I, algebra 2, geometry, calculus, advanced math, biology, chemistry, and physics. Our analysis of CRDC data showed that 19 percent of alternative schools offered no math classes and 27 percent offered no science classes.

³⁰CRDC does not count an independent study as a class.

consistent with prior GAO work on high school students' college readiness which found that small schools offered fewer advanced math and science classes than large schools.³¹

The alternative schools we visited had a range of learning environments and educational approaches. Most school officials we spoke to said they use teacher-led classroom-based instruction and several noted that they supplement student learning with virtual coursework. Most school officials described tailoring lessons in both physical and virtual classrooms. For example, students of varying academic levels may sit in a physical classroom and work on different assignments with a teacher providing guidance. In contrast, a few alternative schools we visited primarily use virtual platforms to educate their students. For example, officials we spoke to from one virtual school said they used pre-recorded videos with an option for students to connect with instructors.

While virtual schools can offer students flexibility in when and where they learn, this arrangement may also result in less interaction with school staff. According to most district and school officials, building positive relationships between students and school staff is critical to learning. For example, officials at one virtual school we visited said that although they assign each student a coach, it still can be difficult to engage students. Recent research funded by Education's Institute of Education Sciences raised questions about the effectiveness of virtual learning, also noting that students in an online algebra course scored lower than students in a face-to-face course.³²

Several alternative schools we visited use project-based learning, through which students investigate and respond to a complex question over an extended period of time. For example, an official from one school we visited said the school had students complete multidisciplinary projects that explore questions like why countries limit the number of possible citizens or why countries go to war. Officials from two schools said that by presenting and critiquing projects, students demonstrate public speaking

³¹GAO, *K-12 Education: Public High Schools with More Students in Poverty Provide Fewer Academic Offerings to Prepare for College* [GAO-19-8](#) (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 11, 2018).

³²American Institutes for Research, *Getting Back on Track, Research Brief 4: What Math Content Is Taught and Learned in Online and Face-to-Face Algebra Credit Recovery Courses?* (Washington, DC, 2017). Note: this research did not identify a difference between students who took virtual and face to face classes in performance in future classes or graduation outcomes.

skills and learn how to give and receive feedback. One school official described project-based learning as an active way to engage students who struggled with traditional instruction methods such as lectures and worksheets. Officials from most schools we visited said they also provide their students with internships or career and technical education. For example, officials at one school we visited highlighted their health and fitness career pathway, which provides students with internships at health facilities.

Another tool available to alternative school students is credit recovery. Credit recovery is available to students who have fallen behind academically and is offered through accelerated coursework in classrooms or virtual classes.³³ According to CRDC data, 50 percent of alternative schools offered their students some form of credit recovery during the 2015-16 school year, which is slightly lower than the rate of nonalternative schools.

Among alternative schools, those with a dedicated or partial focus on academics more frequently offered credit recovery compared to discipline-focused ones, according to our analysis of 2015-16 CRDC data.³⁴ While most alternative schools we visited offered their students credit recovery options, the extent of credit recovery varied by school. For example, officials from one school we visited said their students typically take two to five virtual self-paced credit recovery classes at a time. Officials from several schools noted that some students lack the necessary literacy skills to use virtual learning platforms, which are commonly used for credit recovery.

A higher percentage of students in alternative schools were chronically absent (46 percent) as compared to nonalternative schools (16 percent),

³³The CRDC defines credit recovery as programs that “aim to help schools graduate more students by giving students who have fallen behind the chance to recover credits through a multitude of different strategies, including online. Different programs allow students to work on their credit recovery classes over the summer, on school breaks, after school, on weekends, at home on their own, at night in school computer labs, or even during the school day.”

³⁴Reliable data were not available on the extent to which students participated in such programs.

according to our analysis of 2015-16 CRDC data.³⁵ Most schools we visited offered classes at night, virtually, or on a part-time basis. Moreover, officials from all schools we visited described their students as experiencing trauma such as poverty, housing instability, mental health issues or substance abuse. Since personal challenges can distract students from learning, most schools we visited focused on stabilizing and supporting their students. For example, officials from several alternative schools we visited said they helped students by implementing social and emotional learning or positive behavioral interventions and supports.³⁶ Officials from most schools said they provided students with mental health support. Additionally, several district officials said that alternative schools connected students with other social services, such as food, clothing, and transportation.

Schools varied in the types of social service resources they offered and whether services were available onsite or off. For example, while officials from most schools we visited noted having access to mental health staff and counselors, a few schools, particularly those focused on virtual learning, had minimal staff and did not have mental health supports. In 2019, we reported that alternative schools had a lower percentage of nurses, social workers, and counselors than nonalternative schools.³⁷

³⁵According to Education's CRDC, a chronically absent student is a student who is absent 15 or more school days during the school year. A student is absent if he or she is not physically on school grounds and is not participating in instruction or instruction-related activities at an approved off-grounds location for at least half the school day.

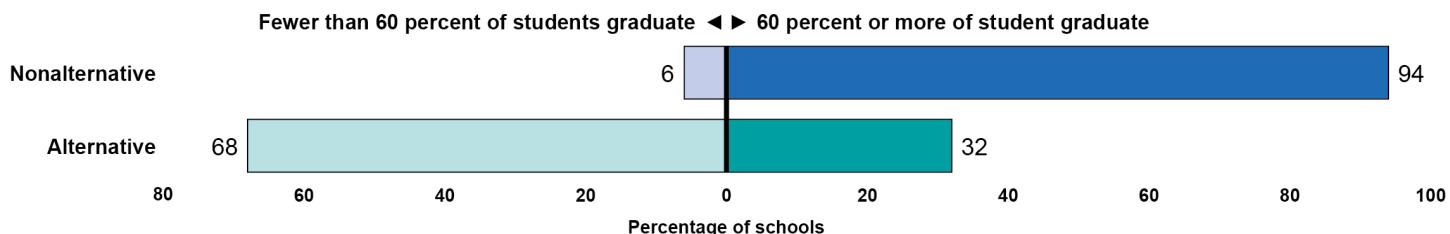
³⁶Social and Emotional Learning is intended to enhance students' abilities to deal effectively and ethically with daily tasks and challenges. It integrates the following five core competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports is a school-wide framework that focuses on positive behavioral expectations. It aims to focus on preferred behaviors by teaching students what to do, instead of focusing on what not to do.

³⁷[GAO-19-373](#). Data from this report also show that alternative schools had a slightly higher percentage of psychologists than nonalternative schools.

Alternative Schools Had Low Graduation and Academic Proficiency Rates

Academic outcomes for students were substantially lower in alternative schools than in nonalternative schools for the 2015-16 school year.³⁸ High schools failing to graduate one-third or more of their students must be identified for comprehensive support and improvement.³⁹ According to our analysis of Education's data, most alternative schools for which data were available had 4-year graduation rates that fell below this threshold, and most nonalternative schools were above it (see fig. 6).⁴⁰

Figure 6: 4-Year Graduation Rates of Alternative and Nonalternative High Schools, School Year 2015-16



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Education data. | GAO-20-310

Note: We identified alternative school academic outcomes from Education's *EDFacts* data by matching schools categorized as alternative in Education's Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC). However, differences in how data were collected and reported to these data sets led to lower numbers of schools available for analysis. Thirty-one percent of the alternative schools identified in the CRDC did not have associated *EDFacts* graduation rate data available in part based on states' individual reporting policies. Additionally, about 20 percent of alternative schools in the CRDC were excluded from our *EDFacts* analysis because Education restricts data for small and medium reporting groups to protect student privacy.

Our analysis of graduation rates at alternative schools shows that rates were notably different for different student demographic groups. Alternative schools for which data were available had lower graduation

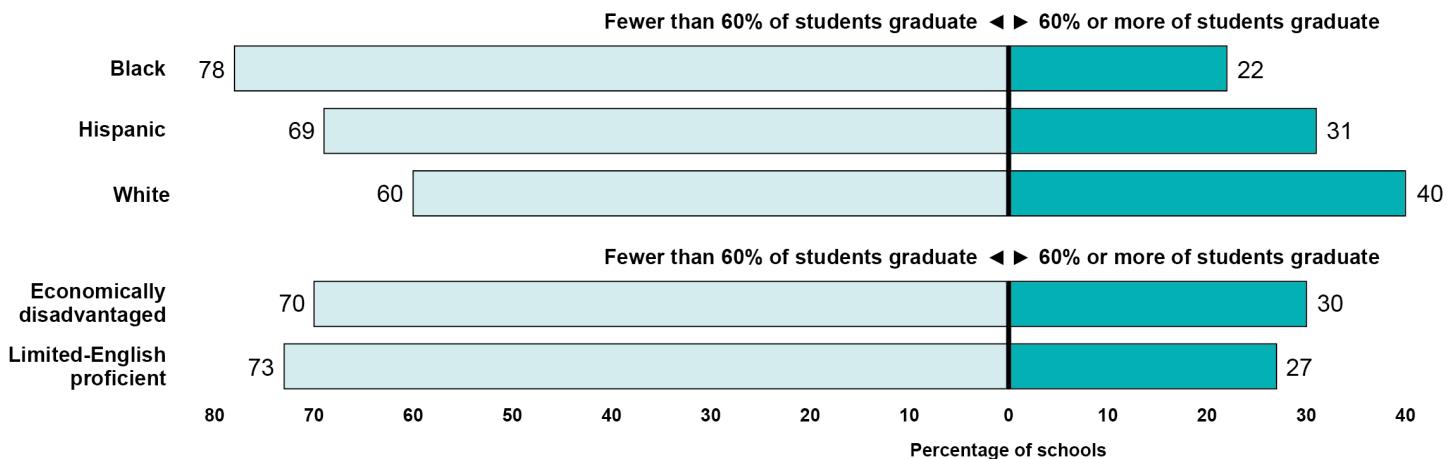
³⁸Our analysis of *EDFacts* includes all graduation and assessment data available on alternative schools as identified via the CRDC. Some of these schools did not have associated *EDFacts* data on graduation rates (31 percent) and academic proficiency (47 percent) in part because of state reporting policies. For example, some states report graduation and assessment data for alternative school students through their home school, limiting the data associated with alternative schools. In addition, about 20 percent of schools were excluded from our analysis because Education restricts certain data to protect student privacy.

³⁹20 U.S.C. § 6311(c)(4)(D)(i)(II). ESSA requires states to measure the percentage of students in a cohort who graduated 4 years after starting the ninth grade. 20 U.S.C. § 6311(c)(4)(B)(iii). The cohort is adjusted to add or remove students who transfer, leave the country, or are deceased.

⁴⁰GAO cannot determine, based on available data, whether there is a causal relationship between poor academic outcomes for students and the education received at alternative schools, as most of these schools serve students who are already at risk of educational failure.

rates for Black and Hispanic students than for white students (see fig. 7). The graduation rates for economically disadvantaged or limited English proficient students were also low.

Figure 7: 4-Year Graduation Rates of Alternative High Schools by Demographic Groups, School Year 2015-16



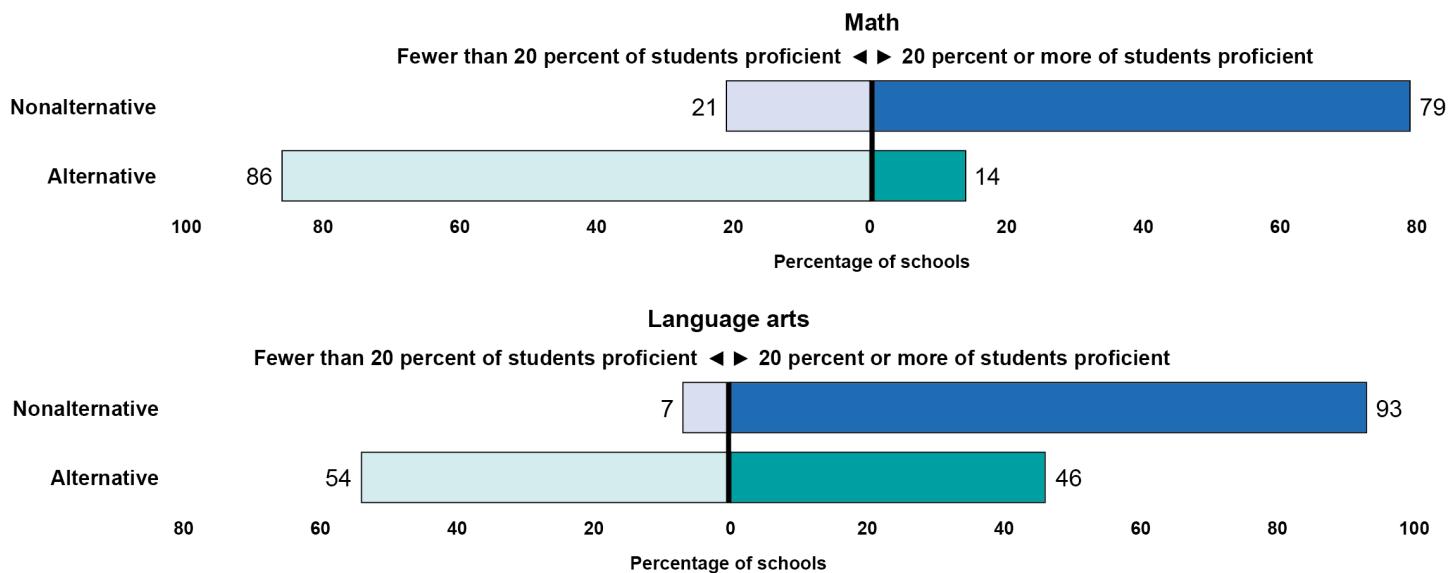
Source: GAO analysis of Department of Education data. | GAO-20-310

Note: We identified alternative school academic outcomes from Education's *EDFacts* data by matching schools categorized as alternative in Education's Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC). However, differences in how data were collected and reported to these data sets led to lower numbers of schools available for analysis. Thirty-one percent of the alternative schools identified in the CRDC did not have associated *EDFacts* graduation rate data available in part based on states' individual reporting policies. Additionally, about 20 percent of alternative schools in the CRDC were excluded from our *EDFacts* analysis because Education restricts data for small and medium reporting groups to protect student privacy.

Our analysis of Education's 2015-16 data on state assessments for academic proficiency also found that alternative schools differed from nonalternative schools with regard to student proficiency in math and language arts.⁴¹ Most alternative schools for which data were available had fewer than 20 percent of their students proficient in math and language arts (see fig. 8).

⁴¹At least once in high school, states must measure students' academic achievement via proficiency on the state's annual assessments in mathematics and reading or language arts. 20 U.S.C. § 6311(b)(2)(B)(v)(I). In this report, we refer to the reading/language arts variable in *EDFacts* as language arts.

Figure 8: Alternative and Nonalternative High Schools' Proficiency Rates, School Year 2015-16

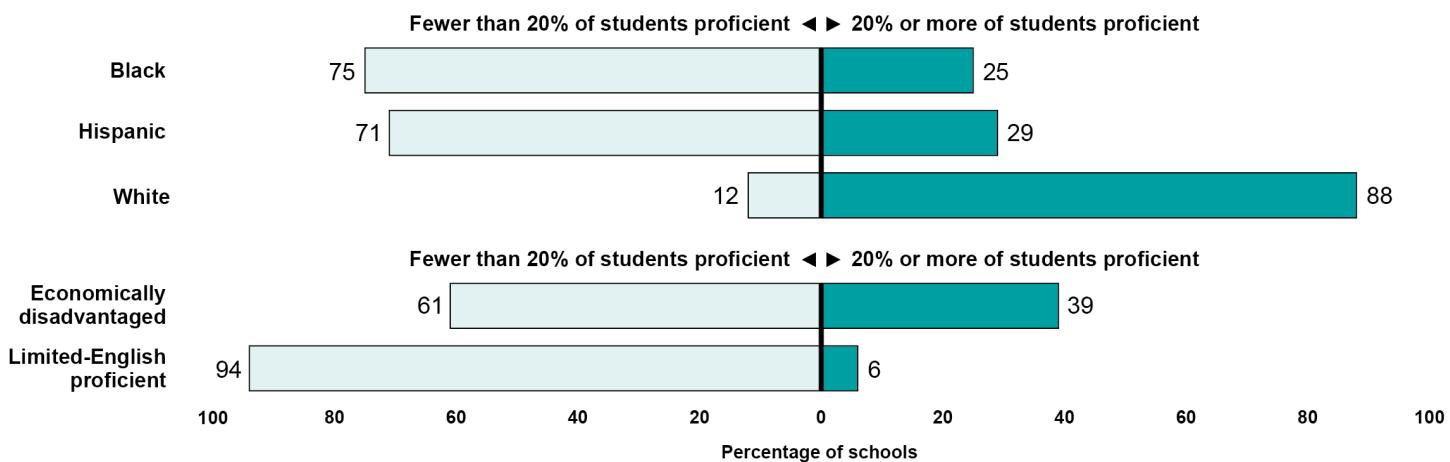


Source: GAO analysis of Department of Education data. | GAO-20-310

Note: We identified alternative school academic outcomes from Education's *EDFacts* data by matching schools categorized as alternative in Education's Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC). Proficiency rate data were available for about one-third of alternative schools because of differences in how data were collected and reported. Almost half the alternative schools identified in the CRDC did not have associated *EDFacts* proficiency rate data available in part based on states' individual reporting policies. Additionally, about 20 percent of alternative schools were excluded because Education restricts data for small and medium reporting groups to protect student privacy.

Our analysis of Education's 2015-16 data also shows differences between assessment proficiency for different student demographic groups in alternative schools. Compared to girls, boys attending alternative schools for which data were available had lower rates of proficiency in both math and language arts. White students attending alternative schools had higher rates of proficiency in language arts as well as math, compared to other student groups (see fig. 9).

Figure 9: Alternative High Schools' Proficiency Rates for Language Arts by Demographic Groups, School Year 2015-16



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Education data. | GAO-20-310

Note: We identified alternative school academic outcomes from Education's *EDFacts* data by matching schools categorized as alternative in Education's Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC). Proficiency rate data were available for about one-third of alternative schools because of differences in how data were collected and reported. Almost half the alternative schools identified in the CRDC did not have associated *EDFacts* proficiency rate data available in part based on states' individual reporting policies. Additionally, about 20 percent of alternative schools were excluded because Education restricts data for small and medium reporting groups to protect student privacy.

Selected State Plans Describe Accountability Systems That Assess Alternative Schools

Selected States Assess
Alternative and
Nonalternative Schools in
the Same Manner, But
Some Identify Low-
Performing Alternative
Schools Differently

Assessing Differences in School Performance

Our review of 15 state ESSA plans found that states assess the performance of their respective alternative and nonalternative high schools in the same manner. We also found that all of these states used ESSA's flexibilities to include indicators that, although used for all schools, consider alternative schools' unique challenges. All 15 selected state accountability systems include at least one indicator that research organizations and relevant studies consider useful in capturing alternative school achievement. These indicators include college and career readiness, extended-year graduation rates, and attendance or chronic absenteeism (see table 1).

Table 1: Indicators Included in Selected ESSA State Plans for High School Performance Assessment

Selected states	College and career readiness	Extended year graduation rate ^a	Attendance or chronic absenteeism
Arizona	X	X	X
California	X	X ^b	--
Colorado	--	X	--
Florida	X	--	--
Georgia	X	X	X
Idaho	X	X	--
Illinois	X	X	X
Kentucky	X	X	--
Michigan	X	X	X
Minnesota	--	X	X
Missouri	--	--	X
North Carolina	X	--	--
Texas	X	--	--
Virginia	--	--	X
Washington	X	X ^c	X

Source: GAO analysis of selected state plans, available as of August 2019, as required by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and related state documents. | GAO-20-310.

^aExtended-year graduation rates expand the graduation timeframe beyond the traditional 4-year graduation rate.

^bIn November 2019, Education approved California's amended state plan, which includes an extended year graduation rate, according to California state documents. As of March 18, 2020, the amended plan was not posted on Education's ESSA state plan website.

^cWashington's graduation rate indicator is primarily based on a 4-year student cohort, but also provides additional credit to schools that graduate students in 5, 6, or 7 years.

Eleven of the selected states use college and career readiness indicators. These capture things like attainment of an industry-recognized certification and participation in an internship or apprenticeship. Such

achievements can help students be prepared for a post-graduation pathway that does not involve higher education. Two research organizations reported that preparing students for the workforce is especially important for alternative schools, which often have career-oriented themes or specific missions related to workforce-preparation.⁴²

Ten states use extended-year graduation rates, in addition to a 4-year rate.⁴³ For example, Colorado uses both a 4-year and 7-year graduation rate, and heavily weighs the 7-year rate in their overall calculation. According to Colorado officials, the 4-year graduation rate for alternative schools was 39 percent, as compared to their 7-year rate of 52 percent for school year 2017-18.

Eight of the selected states adopted an attendance or chronic absenteeism indicator.⁴⁴ As previously mentioned, students in alternative schools are more likely to be chronically absent than their peers in nonalternative schools, according to our analysis of Education's data. According to research, poor attendance correlates to lower student assessment scores and can be an early warning sign that a student may drop out of high school.⁴⁵ Most district and alternative school officials we spoke to identified student attendance as a challenge for alternative school students and several explicitly noted the connection between attendance and performance. Officials from several districts and schools said they track student attendance so they can intervene if they observe troubling trends.

⁴²Carinne Deeds and Jennifer DePaoli, *Measuring Success: Accountability for Alternative Education* (Washington, D.C.: American Youth Policy Forum and Civic Enterprises, 2017).

⁴³ESSA allows states to use an extended-year graduation rate, in addition to their 4-year rate. 20 U.S.C. § 6311(c)(4)(B)(iii)(II). Extended-year graduation rates expand the graduation timeframe beyond the traditional 4-years. This provides students who struggle to meet graduation requirements within 4 years more time to do so. Several school officials we spoke to said many alternative school students are under-credited and over age when they enroll.

⁴⁴Chronic absenteeism measures how much school a student misses for any reason, including excused, unexcused, or discipline-related absences. The definition of chronic absenteeism can vary.

⁴⁵Ginsberg, Alan, Jordan, Phyllis, and Chang, Hedy, *Absences Add Up: How School Attendance Influences Student Success*, Attendance Works (August 2014). For additional information, see U.S. Department of Education. *Chronic Absenteeism in the Nation's Schools: A Hidden Educational Crisis*, accessed January 22, 2020, <https://www2.ed.gov/datalstory/chronicabsenteeism.html>.

Identifying Low-Performing Schools

Based on their system of “meaningful differentiation”, states must develop a methodology to identify which schools need comprehensive support and improvement.⁴⁶ Through our review of 15 state plans and site visits, we identified three states (California, Colorado, and Idaho) that, as part of their accountability system, have adopted approaches to differentiate alternative schools when identifying them for comprehensive support and improvement.

For example, Idaho applies its system of “meaningful differentiation” to individual categories of schools (i.e., schools serving kindergarten through grade eight, high schools, and alternative high schools). Respective thresholds are set at the assessment scores that capture the lowest 5 percent of Title I schools in each category. Alternative high schools with scores at or below their specific threshold, regardless of their Title I status, are identified for support.

As another example, California uses a modified graduation rate indicator to identify low performing alternative schools.⁴⁷ The indicator is based on students eligible to graduate within one-year and credits students for achievements other than a standard high school diploma, such as a high school equivalency certificate, special education certificate of completion, and an adult education high school diploma. According to state documents, California officials believe a 4-year graduation rate is not appropriate for alternative schools since many of their students are credit deficient and not on track to graduate when they enroll.

California and Colorado identified a greater proportion of their alternative schools for comprehensive support and improvement as compared to

⁴⁶As stated earlier, ESSA requires states to annually “establish a system of meaningfully differentiating...all public schools in the State...” in order to identify schools for additional support. 20 U.S.C. § 6311(c)(4)(C).

⁴⁷After reviewing a draft of this report, Education officials indicated that they have not approved California to implement a one-year graduation rate for alternative schools and noted that the approach is not consistent with statutory requirements. They plan to follow up with California.

nonalternative schools for the 2018-19 school year (see table 2).⁴⁸ The primary reason for this, officials said, was that more than a third of students at the alternative schools failed to graduate. In contrast, their nonalternative schools were generally identified for comprehensive support and improvement because they fell into the lowest performing 5 percent of eligible schools.

Table 2: Percent of Alternative and Nonalternative Schools Identified for Comprehensive Support and Improvement, School Year 2018-19

State	Percent of schools identified for comprehensive support and improvement	
	Alternative schools	Nonalternative schools
California	36 (355 of 990 schools)	5 (426 of 8,920 schools)
Colorado	59 (54 of 91 schools)	3 (61 of 1,811 schools)

Source: Interviews with selected state officials responsible for alternative school accountability. | GAO-20-310

Some Selected States Have Additional Accountability Systems for Alternative Schools

We also identified several states that have additional accountability systems for alternative schools that are distinct from their federal accountability system required by ESSA.⁴⁹ According to state officials we interviewed and documents we reviewed, these states developed additional accountability systems to align with the mission of alternative schools in educating at-risk youth.

Most of these alternative state accountability systems include indicators that use nuanced or locally determined data for alternative school assessment. For example, Arizona's accountability system for alternative schools has an indicator for students' progress towards graduation as measured by their academic persistence and credit accrual. Relatedly, North Carolina's system assesses student persistence, as determined by their continued enrollment. Colorado's system also grants districts the

⁴⁸California identified these schools using a methodology that Education had not fully approved since it did not include data on progress in attaining English Language Proficiency, a required indicator. For this reason, Education placed California's fiscal year 2018 Title I, Part A grant award on "high-risk" status. In December 2019, Education officials told us they have discussed the matter with California officials. Kentucky, the other state we visited, did not identify any alternative schools for comprehensive support and improvement. While Kentucky reported to the CRDC that the state has alternative schools, officials told us that the state classifies them as alternative programs, which they said are entities not subject to federal accountability determinations. Rather, state officials explained that performance data for students attending alternative programs are used to hold their original, nonalternative school accountable.

⁴⁹Arizona, Colorado, North Carolina, and Texas.

option of submitting additional performance data for their alternative schools, such as scores from other types of academic assessments.

Moreover, alternative state accountability systems in all of these states broaden the range of performance measured for alternative schools. For example, Arizona includes more options in its college and career readiness indicator for alternative schools (e.g., work-based learning, military enlistment). Additionally, all of these state systems broaden achievement captured under the graduation rate indicator—such as through use of an extended-year graduation rate. Two state systems also expand which students are included in such calculations, such as by recognizing students who completed high school without a diploma (e.g., earned a GED).

Similar to their accountability systems under ESSA, these states generally use their state alternative school accountability systems to identify low-performing schools. Colorado officials said fewer alternative schools were identified as low-performing by their state alternative accountability system as compared to their ESSA-based approach to identifying schools for comprehensive support and improvement.

Agency Comments

We provided a draft of this report to the Department of Education for review and comment. Education provided technical comments, which we incorporated as appropriate.

As agreed with your office, unless you publicly announce the contents of this report earlier, we plan no further distribution until 30 days from the report date. At that time, we will send copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees, the Secretary of Education, and the Attorney General. In addition, the report will be available at no charge on the GAO website at <http://www.gao.gov>. If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact me at (617) 788-0580 or nowickij@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. GAO staff who made key contributions to this report are listed in appendix II.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jacqueline M. Nowicki".

Jacqueline M. Nowicki, Director
Education, Workforce, and Income Security Issues

Appendix I: Analysis of National Data on Alternative Schools

Civil Rights Data Collection

To determine what is known about alternative schools' academic environments and their students' performance, we analyzed Education's Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) for school year 2015-16 (the most recent publically available). The CRDC is a biennial survey that Education requires nearly every public school and district in the United States to complete. Territorial schools, Department of Defense schools, and tribal schools are not part of the 2015-16 CRDC. Conducted by Education's Office for Civil Rights, the survey collects data on the nation's public schools (pre-K through grade 12), including school characteristics, student enrollment, and various class offerings.

To analyze these data, we used the 2015-16 CRDC definition of an alternative school: "[A] public elementary or secondary school that addresses the needs of students that typically cannot be met in a regular school program. The school provides nontraditional education; serves as an adjunct to a regular school; and falls outside of the categories of regular education, special education, or vocational education."¹ CRDC data are self-reported by districts. Alternative schools can be of various types—regular alternative schools and charter alternative schools. The CRDC identifies 3,294 schools as alternative schools. Because juvenile justice facilities also address the educational needs of students that cannot be met in a regular school setting, we included in our study all juvenile justice facilities that are reported in the CRDC, regardless of whether they were identified in the CRDC as alternative schools.² This increased our total number of alternative schools by 383.³ We also eliminated 120 magnet schools and special education schools that had classified themselves as alternative schools, as they do not meet the CRDC definition of an alternative school. In total, we analyzed data on

¹See CRDC's 2015-16 School Form:

<https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/crdc-2015-16-all-schools-form.pdf>.

²According to Education officials, schools are identified in the CRDC as a juvenile justice facility based on the Common Core of Data directory information. For the purpose of the survey, the CRDC does not permit a school district to classify a school as a juvenile justice facility or not. They are already designated as such. However, according to Education officials, school districts may notify the Office for Civil Rights of a discrepancy in school designation so that Education can correct the information.

³We classified all juvenile justice facilities as having a disciplinary focus.

3,557 alternative schools. In many of our analyses, we compared students at alternative schools with students at nonalternative schools.⁴

We analyzed school characteristics by type of alternative school a student attended—regular alternative school, charter alternative school, and juvenile justice facility. We also conducted analyses by alternative school focus—academic, disciplinary, and mixture of both academic and disciplinary. Additionally, we examined student enrollment and rates of chronic absenteeism. When analyzing high school data, we defined the high school population by including ungraded high schools and schools that served any grade 9 through 12 and excluding schools that served grades 8 or below.⁵

In addition, we used the 2015-16 school year Common Core of Data, which is administered by Education's National Center for Education Statistics and annually collects nonfiscal data about all public schools in the nation. We attempted to use the free and reduced-price lunch variable as a proxy for school poverty. However, because this variable was missing from a large number of alternative schools, we were unable to conduct this analysis.

EDFacts

To identify academic outcomes of students at alternative schools, we used Education's *EDFacts* data from school year 2015-16.⁶ *EDFacts* collects data from state education agencies, including graduation rates and student proficiency on state academic assessments. Graduation and assessment proficiency rates were not available for all alternative schools identified in the CRDC. For our *EDFacts* analysis, we categorized schools as alternative if the CRDC identified them as such. We did this because the *EDFacts* data files on graduation and assessment proficiency rates do not include a variable that categorizes schools as alternative. Our analysis includes graduation rates from 1,514 alternative schools, which

⁴We defined nonalternative schools as any school in the CRDC, including special education schools, that didn't fall under our definition of alternative schools.

⁵For some variables, we limited our analysis to high schools because the associated CRDC survey questions were only answered by high schools (e.g. certain questions on math and science classes offered).

⁶*EDFacts* is a centralized data collection through which state education agencies submit pre-K through grade 12 data to Education.

account for 51 percent of those schools included in the CRDC. Assessment proficiency data includes more than 900, or about 30 percent, of alternative schools included in the CRDC.

To better understand why some schools did not report these academic outcomes in *EDFacts*, we consulted with officials from Education and four states (Georgia, Illinois, Texas, Virginia) and reviewed related documents.⁷ We selected these states because, collectively, they made up 40 percent of the alternative schools without graduation rate data in *EDFacts* and 39 percent of the alternative schools without assessment proficiency data. Based on the information provided by Education and these states, we concluded that *EDFacts* data are sufficiently reliable for our purposes of describing academic outcomes for alternative schools. We came to this conclusion because the data capture reporting for the appropriate set of schools as identified per state policies and *EDFacts* reporting requirements. In most cases, the discrepancies between alternative schools reported in the CRDC and *EDFacts* resulted from state policy variations regarding whether alternative school students' outcomes are reported with the alternative school or the student's original school. Due to these variations in state reporting policies, the types of schools and students for which academic outcome data are available differ somewhat across states. Further, Education officials told us that alternative schools with a small cohort size would have limited or no *EDFacts* data on these academic outcomes because the data are restricted to protect student privacy. Despite these limitations, the *EDFacts* data provides the most complete national data available on academic outcomes for alternative schools.

Using these data, we analyzed school-level information on 4-year graduation rates and student proficiency in math and language arts. We identified differences among demographic groups, and between alternative and nonalternative schools. We limited our analysis to high schools only, defining the population consistently with our CRDC high school analysis noted above. For our analysis of graduation rates, we also excluded high schools that did not offer grade 12 as such schools would not be expected to graduate a student.

⁷GAO interviewed officials who worked on assessment and accountability for each state's education agency.

Appendix II: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

GAO Contact	Jacqueline M. Nowicki at (617) 788-0580 or nowickij@gao.gov
Staff Acknowledgments	In addition to the contact name above, Scott Spicer (Assistant Director), Kathryn O'Dea Lamas (Analyst-in-Charge), John Mingus, James Rebbe, Rachel Schultz, and Shelia Thorpe made key contributions to this report. Also contributing were James Bennett, Deborah Bland, Sherri Doughty, Kirsten Lauber, Sheila R. McCoy, Brittni Milam, and Stacy Ouellette.

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